

12 Practice Habits

A year's worth of practice ideas for everyone

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Originally published in the Harp Column Magazine
January/February 2007 volume 15, issue 4

1. Warm up everyday

Would you go for a run without first stretching and warming up your muscles? You could, but it probably isn't the best idea. The same is true for playing the harp - you can jump right in and start practicing, but your practice time will be greatly improved by stretching and warming up with a few scales and arpeggios first. Warming up gets the blood flowing to your fingers, but just as importantly, warming up is also preparation time for your mind. Taking time to stretch helps your body relax before tackling that tricky passage. Taking time to warm up allows your mind to switch into playing-the-harp mode. Playing the harp takes physical endurance and mental focus; warming up daily improves both of these skills.

2. Incorporate technique exercise into your daily practice

Technique exercises are like leafy green vegetables, you may not always like them, but there is no denying they are good for you. Every harpist, whether they are a beginner or a virtuoso, can benefit from spending a few minutes each day on a short technique exercise. Spending time practicing a technical element such as trills or thumb slides, in a repetitive exercise format allows you to focus on only perfecting that specific skill. When we take a specific skill the out of the more complicated context of a piece, and practice technique for technique's sake our skills improve faster than if we only drill the problematic measures. Whether you are learning a new skill or just brushing up and old one, practicing technique exercises will help you become better faster.

3. Practice in little sections

Focused short practice gets better results than long sloppy practice. It has happened to all of us, you are playing a piece and everything is going swimmingly, and then the dreaded "spot" in the music appears - you trip, you drop rhythms and fingerings, you might even fall down and come to a complete stop. You pick yourself up and where do you go - back to the beginning? Instead of playing through the entire piece or even the entire page or section over and over, spend the bulk of your practice time fixing the specific problem "spots" in your piece. In music, as in life, it is often the transitions from section to section or from one idea to another that give us the most trouble. The fix can be as simple as practicing the jumps between two chords, or linking two measures together. Save yourself the energy and the time, practice the little sections that need it the most first and then enjoy playing the entire piece.

4. Take breaks

When you practice with focus, your brain gets tired. When you are tired you eventually reach a point where continuing to practice does more harm than good because careless mistakes become more frequent. The solution is simple: take a break. Practicing for several sessions with a few short breaks in between improves the overall quality of your practice time. Breaks can be short – just enough time to get up, stretch, drink some water and then practice again – or breaks can be longer. The important thing to remember is that once you stop practicing be sure to set a time when you will start again. The mother of a 3-year-old violin student once asked Dr. Suzuki how long should her child practice and Dr. Suzuki replied, “Two minutes with joy, five times a day.” While most of us are no longer three years old and should practice for longer than two minutes at a stretch, the spirit of Dr. Suzuki’s advice will improve our practice routines too.

5. Practice with and without the metronome

The metronome – is it your friend or foe? It is constant, comforting, relentless, even irritating at times and how you use a metronome determines if it will become your best friend or worst enemy. The steady tick forces you to keep going, exposes rhythm errors, and holds you back when you want to rush. At first it may seem impossible to play with the metronome, and then eventually as you practice everything seems fixed and you confidently play in time with each tick. So you turn off the metronome only to discover it seems impossible to play without those comforting ticks! What is the solution to our love/hate relationship with the metronome? Alternate practicing with the metronome turned on and with it turned off each time you practice. Turn it on to discover and fix rhythm problems in a piece, turn it off and practice the same passage to develop your own steady inner pulse. By alternating practicing with and without the metronome eventually you become your own metronome with a strong and steady inner pulse to guide you.

6. Slow down

Resist the temptation to play your pieces at the printed tempo marking all the time. It doesn’t matter if you are beginning to learn a new piece or polishing an old favorite, practicing slowly will solve a world of problems. If you work on a piece for weeks and weeks and it just doesn’t seem to get any better, then there is a good chance that you are practicing too fast. Or maybe you can play it just fine hands separately, but then when you put the hands together it falls apart. Slow it down. Find the tempo you practice the music hands separately and divide that in half to determine the maximum tempo you should practice hands together. After all your brain is sending twice as many signals to two hands verses only one. Slow practice is also a great way to clean house with pieces you already know. When you slow down you find and fix all those little mistakes that, left unchecked, turn into big problems. If you are having problems bringing a piece with a very fast tempo up to speed, try practicing it two times slower (we’re talking half as fast or even 3 times slower than the printed tempo) for each time you practice it fast. Muscle memory at the harp is an amazing thing. Once your fingers learn how to play a piece correctly at a slow tempo, playing it fast is only a matter of time.

7. Write it down

Sometimes just remembering what you are supposed to work on between lessons can be a challenge. Nothing is less fun than discovering that you forgot to practice something during the week. If your teacher doesn't write down your practice goals for the week, then take the time right after your lesson to write down the things you want to accomplish before your next lesson. When you have a great deal of things to accomplish in your practice between lessons, being organized is even more essential. You may take it one step further and keep a daily practice log. This practice record will help you keep track of what you have already practiced and what you still need to work on as the time between lessons passes.

8. Set small practice goals

Most of us set goals we want to accomplish by the end of the week or by next month, but it doesn't seem too rewarding while we are in the trenches practicing each day. Some days our big goal feels very far away indeed, and when you focus on the big picture it can make all the practice in our future seem like a daunting task. If you are feeling overwhelmed, try setting a small and reasonably attainable goal each time you sit down to practice. Decide you are going to perfect that one line, or fix three trouble spots this practice session. When you finish you will have a feeling of accomplishment, because you actually have accomplished something. It may not be much, but it does get you one step closer to the larger goal. As the saying goes, every long journey begins with a single step.

9. Listen to recordings

Wouldn't it be nice to practice while you are in the car, exercising, or cleaning house? One of the easiest ways to really get to know a piece is to listen to it. Get into the habit of listening to recordings of the pieces you are practicing. (You can even listen with your music in front of you while you take a practice break.) In fact, don't stop with just the pieces you are currently learning, listen to all kinds of harp pieces and even other genres like piano recordings, chamber music, and opera. Better yet go to a concert. Music is a language; and how do we learn to speak a language, by hearing it over and over again. Imagine if you never heard anyone speak. How much harder would it be to learn to talk? The same is true with music. You can learn about phrasing from opera arias, balancing the melody with the accompaniment from piano solos, dynamics from orchestral works, and the list goes on and on. The more music you listen to, the more you will just naturally incorporate musical elements into your playing.

10. Memorize while you practice

When memorizing a piece or a passage of music becomes a necessity, you may find yourself wondering how to memorize music you already "know." Instead of putting off and dreading memorizing a piece until after you have already learned it, try memorizing the music *while* you learn it. It is much easier to memorize in small sections while you are already repeating passages as part of the practicing process anyway. A word of caution: it can backfire if you try to memorize music too soon; you might memorize mistakes if you are not familiar with the piece yet. Try this swivel-the-stand method for memorizing. After you have practiced a short section with the music many times and you are confident you know

how it should sound, swivel the stand away from you so you can not see the music and try to play the same passage. No guessing – if you don't know what note comes next then swivel the stand back and look it up. Taking the time to swivel around the stand and look up the notes you don't know is just enough of a pain that your brain makes more of an effort to remember it next time. Repeat the process until you can play the passage without looking.

11. Record and listen to yourself

What is better than listening to a recording of a famous harpist performing the piece you are perfecting? Listening to a recording of *you* playing the piece you are perfecting. When you listen to yourself play without having the distraction of actually playing you will hear all kinds of things you didn't hear before or even know you were doing (or not doing). Recording yourself is also a great way to practice performing; tape recorders, mini discs, mp3 recorders, all can give you a good case of nerves. Try this fun way to play a duet with yourself. Record yourself playing one part of a duet and then play the recording back while you play the other part live along with yourself. What is it like for other musicians to play with you in an ensemble? Are you counting correctly; is your pulse steady; are your dynamics or tempo changes easy to follow? Even if you aren't getting ready for a big performance, recording yourself is a very effective and efficient way to improve your playing.

12. Practice performing

Eventually the day will come when you perform for an audience. You have practiced the music for weeks or months, the piece is great at home or in your practice room, but you never quite make it all the way through it perfectly in your lesson. Now in addition to your regular practice it is time to practice performing. Silence your inner critic and keep playing straight through the piece, no matter what happens; sure problems will come up, wrong notes may happen, but keep going. Go back and work on the mistakes after you finish playing the entire piece. Playing all the way through the music, without stopping in even in the face of wrong notes or getting lost, takes practice. No wonder performing is scary – if we haven't practiced for it! Practice performing by giving a mock recital for your friends or family in the weeks prior to the big performance. Practice performing while your little brother is being his usual annoying and distracting self. Better yet ask someone to purposely distract you while you are practicing performing. Can you play your piece while someone is asking you questions, making noise, or making you laugh? Sit down and perform your piece after you have not touched a harp in hours. Simulate nervous adrenaline by jumping up and down or running up and down the stairs and then sit down and practice performing. Try to prepare for all of the things that can happen while you are performing. The more times you perform the piece, the better the odds are that your big performance will go well.